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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the reading task, using a conceptual analysis of reading developed by the linguistic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Eschewing theory and explanation while leading his reader through a series of cases and experiences, Wittgenstein causes the reader-experiencer-viewer to "see" that reading is a word which stands for related behaviors; reading has a single use or meaning in each case. The word reading has meaning only from its use in a social context. It is a word for a "family of cases." Ultimately, reading in all of its uses and contexts is a form of behavior. Each case of usage is important, but each remains singular in its application depending upon the use and condition in which the word reading is used. This form of conceptual analysis can provide clarity and direction to researchers in the field of reading. The present concerns of cognitive psychologists--the reduction of uncertainty, the preoccupation with redundancies and regularities of language, and the optimization of attention in searching out the reading target--may gain new dimensions by the conceptual studies of Wittgenstein. (Author)

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A PHILOSOPHY OF READING FOR COGNITIVISTS: WITTGENSTEIN'S VIEW

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A PHILOSOPHY OF READING FOR COGNITIVISTS: WITTGENSTEIN'S VIEW

During the last five years there has been a growing body of literature developed discussing reading as a cognitive task. As a result of this literature a cognitive theory of reading, yet to be fully defined, has emerged. The purpose of this paper is (1) to discuss and summarize three of the main ideas of cognitive theory and research in reading, (2) to point up some areas that these theories seem not to have dealt with, (3) to show how Wittgenstein's analysis of language, namely his analogy of "language games" including the reading of language, is highly consonant with some of the current thinking about reading as cognitive process, and (4) to show how his analytical thought may span and integrate some of the fragmented thinking in this area.

A Summation of Cognitive Thinking Regarding Reading. The persons who are most credited with a concern for cognitive theory of reading are Gibson (4), Hochberg (6), Venezkey (10), Calfee (1), Goodman (5), Kolers (7), and Smith (9). There are some recurring themes among these psychologists and linguists: (1) Although not learned through rule-stated behavior, the child's language is rule-governed in a search for reduction of uncertainty or an effort to subsume information. To explicate, the child seeks to discover and process language through its redundancies and regularities. The reader is not conscious of this process but comes to understand the forms of language repetition as models or strategies, a kind of learning by cases. (2) The child is

seeking to increase economy in processing information, in this case, the features of the written word as he processes print for meaning. And (3) the child has an optimization of attention as he processes features of words important in achieving a reading task. In summation, the child engages in a search task during the reading process in which he tries to discover and use the smallest amount of information (often as a function of short term memory) in searching out his target.

Gibson captured these principles well in a recent talk (Brooklyn College, April 4, 1974) when she stated that the nature of the reading process is not mere decoding, but must be a searching for the strategies and propositions to accommodate a reduction of uncertainty in the accomplishment of the reading task. The child's development in the reading process is progressive, multi-dimensional and uneven. Thus, there is no single model of reading process. The cognitive reading processes remain flexible and adapt to the task; they are economical in that they get the most amount of information from the least number of criteria. Finally, the reading process appears rule-governed or regularized -- at root, reading is not learned by training or telling.

Some Questions Regarding Cognitive Theory and Reading. As convincing and as correct as their interpretations of data prove to be, questions still arise with regard to the sufficiency of their position. What phenomenon occurs that prompts the child to seek a rule-governed system for reducing uncertainty in processing the written word, what gives meaning to this flexibly engaged-in reading task beyond a seemingly inherent drive for processing information (men as informavores)? What

causes the child to fixate on a target as he engages in the search task? (This cause may not reside in developmental theory alone, of course.) Finally, what constitutes a rubric for meaning (the targetted task) for the print-processing child seeking to subsume information? In short, these theories predicated on experimentation, describe the phenomena of what occurs as the child reads more clearly than they explain the cognitive process itself. They are at a primary level in their explanation of how language and reading happen, and of the involvement of the long and short term memory, retrieval or meaning-making systems in the reading process.

The necessarily cautious interpretation of experimentation provides somewhat discrete hypotheses with respect to the reading process. Philosophy is not bound by such methodological niceties and therefore may go directly to a conceptual analysis of what may occur during this process.

Wittgenstein's View of Language. A view of language suggested by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later writings may give a broader perspective to experimental outcomes by viewing "meaning" in the language and reading process.

Before discussing Wittgenstein's view of language it should be pointed out that Wittgenstein never devised a theory of language or meaning. He was a logical analyst who pointed out in his discussion of language that one could not tell what language does, since one is limited by the language that one uses. Thus he developed neither explanation nor rationale concerning language and its acquisition. By using hundreds of examples, he showed the reader what language does. Wittgenstein reasoned by examples and analogies, but his intent was bold, in that he wanted the reader to

see beyond language itself -- and beyond its theoretical frameworks. Thus he led the reader to experience language as the unique way by which one can come to know about it.

The Analogy of Games to Language. To show how language works and meaning derives from it, Wittgenstein used the analogy of the "language game." Wittgenstein did not say that language was a game or that it was a series of interacting games. He employed the analogy as a conceptual device to clarify his ideas about the form and function of language activity.

What is the nature of games in Wittgenstein's view? We must look to the variety of games and ask what they have in common that we would call both of them games? First, implies Wittgenstein, all games have either implicit or explicit rules. They are rule-governed, though most of the activity that is rule-governed is done by the observer and the player as a result of participation and is not stated as a "rule"; thus the principles or rules are abstracted from the practice or emerge from it. These rules are abridgements of activity; they derive from it and do not exist in advance of it for the learner.

Second, games are purposeful in that they seek some object or goal to be attained. There may be minor accomplishments such as making a point in the game, or being a good sport, and there are major goals such as winning the activity. Many of these goals are not stated and are not consciously known to the players.

Third, games are in essence social. Even such games as solitaire have an imagined partner; his absence is noted in the name. Games are communicated activities which have no meaning outside the social context.

Applying this analogy to language, and indeed to reading as Wittgenstein did, we note that he suggests that language is rule-governed, not in the didactic sense of the word but in the inductive sense of reasoning by cases which lead us beyond the example given -- possibly and not infrequently to the principle observed. Moreover, language is purposeful -- it is goal oriented, whether the task is so small as that of discovering visual distinctions between two words, or so large as to solve a problem, or to argue a case. To some degree, the larger the perceived goal, the less concerned is the learner with the intermediary goals. Finally, language is a social activity. Even solitary activity such as reading has an implied social dimension.

The analogy holds beyond this point. Wittgenstein deals with meaning or how words come to mean for the child or the learner in terms of this analogy. Meaning derives not from explanation nor ostensive definitions nor tautologies, but from use. It is with the repetition of the word in an activity that meaning begins. And the repetition must occur not only in syntax, but in forms of life activity where the goals of language activity are honored and real. A language constituent cannot be isolated from its source within the totality of language activity. The language game or activity like all social activity is wholistic, a form of life that expresses a full complement of experience and intention.

Some Integration of Cognitive and Wittgensteinian Thought Regarding Language and Reading. The last part of the discussion speculates on how Wittgenstein's views may give cognitive theorists a broader perspective of language and reading -- a perspective that embraces much of

their thinking, but puts it within a larger theoretical framework. The analogies and explications of Wittgenstein may help us to see how meaning-making occurs.

Regarding the rule-governing aspect of both cognitive theory and Wittgensteinian explication, it is apparent that in different words, nearly the same idea is being expressed; explicit and implicit "rules" are being absorbed by the learner, not in the sense of being taught to him, or told to him, but in the sense of experiencing language in a context. By inductive method, the learner uses these "rules," usually never stated, to participate in a regulated manner, in the communication activity. Hence, language learning is regulated activity in which the learner employs strategies for reducing uncertainties in the languaging process.

It should be pointed out in the Wittgensteinian view that while learning language through cases and paradigms, the child is never limited by the paradigm, but is pointed beyond it. The method of induction by examples is that the case can be used to show many aspects of a problem allowing the learner to pursue the analogy beyond the boundaries of the case.

Wittgenstein implies that language and reading are rule-governed in the broader sense of being regulated in a social context, while the cognitive psychologist is prone to be preoccupied with specific aspects of the child's search for the redundancies in the languaging process. The views of language as rule-governed social activity and strategy by Wittgensteinians, and language as a rule-governed, more discrete entity by cognitivists, is a difference of emphasis only, but this emphasis

develops important distinctions in a larger theoretical framework.

The language "game" (the reading activity, in this case) is goal directed and purposeful. The purposes may have many facets and many levels. The baseball player who perfects his swing in isolation from the ball as a culmination of his effort will not fulfill his task. Similarly the child who decodes merely, has not understood the reading "game" -- which is never fully perfected, simply improved at varying levels. Thus, we understand that the reading task involves targeted activity, but the purpose or intent is never constant, depending on the reading task and the needs of the maturing reader. We have a kind of agreement among cognitivists and the followers of Wittgenstein that no single model or strategy for learning language is adequate. By extrapolation, no single model for explaining the reading process is adequate.

Beyond the extrapolation itself, we might surmise that a models conception for explaining the reading process may not be useful, especially if it obscures our view of that process. The views of psychologists and Wittgensteinian followers regarding the social nature of language and its meanings may not have meshed. Cognitive psychologists are beginning to experiment with the meaning-making aspect of language as well as the syntactical and lexical dimensions of language. However, some cognitive psychologists may have assumed, following Chomsky's lead, that the deep structure of the sentence reflects the semantic component of language. In other words, language itself provides full insight into the analysis of cognitive meaning. This notion directly contradicts Wittgenstein's point of view.

Wittgenstein views language as a facet of behavior. He writes, "Words are also deeds." (II) The language game is "the whole consistency of language and the activities into which it is woven." (II) For Wittgenstein, language is behavior and cannot be separated from the activity of which it is a part. Words are a way of doing something, not merely saying something. Words are defined by their use in a context.

In a syntactical or social context, a word may have related meanings, overlapping meanings or meanings with shades of variation. Wittgenstein stresses the many functions or uses of any word. These words are related to one another, that is, they have a family resemblance. For example, the word reading itself has as many meanings as it has functions. For example, the first grader is reading, though possibly not comprehending, but decoding; the mindless lady who reads TV ads may be reading but not comprehending, but in a different way; the man who is reading his newspaper reads quite differently from the first grader; to say "I am reading your thought," does not relate to reading as print at all. There is a relationship among the functions of reading, but meaning derives from the activity (use) and it means the same thing in none of the cases given.

Wittgenstein admonishes his readers to look at the situation and activity to find the meaning of the word. Indeed, to use words without referring to activity in which they came to mean is to confound the learner. The paradoxes and confusions that occur in language are what help us to the creative act, but to resolve these confusions, to see the word anew, we must go to the activity in which it has its origins. To urge the learner to rethink the meaning of words, he suggests using the word use

instead of meaning. Instead of asking what a word means, ask how it is used in the activity; this act clarifies meaning. "Look and see " he writes insistently, referring the reader to the social activity in which words have meaning. The learner must understand that he is to seek the experience of the word in its social context, not merely definitions and explanations of it.

At root, then, language is not an agreement about terms merely, but an agreement about forms of life. Meaning of terms derives from commonality and agreement about experience; it is not an agreement about the essence of meaning of a word, or about the essence of a symbolic presentation, but a study of words as form of behavior and a part of behavior. To study language -- the abstraction of experience -- may only distort and fragment thinking about it.

This may seem a small point; but the tenaciousness of the view that language may be studied as a kind of complete behavior apart from the experience in a social context has been carried into the study of reading by cognitive psychologists and experimenters. There is little emphasis in linguistic studies of natural language; the child's linguistic and cognitive framework are not explored while he is in the act of learning. Only recently have some cognitive psychologists begun to focus on the experiential and contextural behaviors as well as the linguistic contents of the child's semantic structure.

Pitkin writes: "A child beginning to master a language needs to learn not merely the right label for an object, but also what counts . . . not merely the word, but the concept, to come to terms with the objective

world." (8) The child learns simultaneously what things mean and what things are and these knowledges never occur as a completed kind of activity, but as experience which is progressive, if uneven.

To return to Wittgenstein's thinking, learning a language is mastering a form of activity or behavior. It is not a matter of developing some inner essence of meaning but rather a matter of knowing how to do certain things. "Language is an instrument. Its concepts are instruments." (11) For Wittgenstein, language is pragmatic; he emphasizes the functions of language, rather than the meaning of words.

Following his reasoning by cases, reading means nothing apart from an appropriate action-response. But learning the meaning of the word reading as a function of natural language means being able to use it in most of the appropriate "reading-language games." The reading act cannot be studied apart from activities which are purposeful and ultimately social. To teach the decoding of word families, for example, is a "reading game," but it is only one variety of activity and languaging in a series of socially-based activities to which the child is pointed. That he learns at all implies that he knows a great deal more about the "language game" than is indicated by the activity. Language and reading are not mastered and learned in isolated study, but should be studied in the context of personal and social activity. Languaging behavior then is a pragmatic activity in which language itself plays a part.

The term, reading has as many meanings (uses) as it has functions. Each function should be studied as part of the related family of reading activities. To the degree that "reading games" shift functions as each

"game" points beyond a present reading activity, we are going to have to consider a highly pragmatic concept of defining and studying reading. As the reading act alters its forms and its goals as part of the transient function that the term "reading" embraces, we may have to formulate new ways for conceptualizing its activity. Wittgensteinian theory would suggest that we must view the reading act more broadly. Cognitive psychologists, who interpret experiments and theorize within the limited framework provided by the parameters of controlled environments, further regulated by a limited conceptualization of what the reading act may be, are not wrong. But, their theories and concepts are insufficient to explicate the nature of the reading act. The study of Wittgenstein, particularly Philosophical Investigations, may lead them to see that until the Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis of the reading act is employed, the descriptions provided to us by empirical investigation may limit our exploration of the full nature of the reading process.

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